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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Statement by AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney on The Patient Bill of Rights Act of 1998 March 31, 1998

For more than a decade, working families have lived through a vicious cycle of reduced health care access and higher costs. Still, most of those with health coverage had the assurance, if someone in their family got sick, that they could get care from the best health care system in the world. But today, security is being jeopardized as consumers face fewer health plan choices, more restrictions on the ability to get necessary medical treatment and an emphasis on cost-cutting at the expense of quality.

The AFL-CIO and its unions are the largest organized group of managed care purchasers and consumers. Together, AFL-CIO unions bargain to provide health insurance to more than 40 million Americans — that's one out of every four Americans with employment-based coverage.

The potential of managed care to improve quality, while reducing costs is fast being replaced by cost-driven quality reduction by some managed care organizations with profits as the bottom-line. Union members and all working families are losing confidence in our health care system in general and in managed care in particular.

The Patient Bill of Rights Act of 1998 ensures that every American family has the quality health care they deserve. These rights — the right to a specialist for the care you need, the right to emergency room care, the right to appeal of a health care decision with which you disagree — represent common sense answers to the real life problems experienced by working families across the nation.

With these bills, Congress would extend to the nearly 170 million Americans in private health plans the same protections recently afforded the 90 million beneficiaries of federal health programs by the President's executive memorandum.

While there will be voices of opposition to new mandates in the Congress and in the health care industry, the real argument is about whether all Americans deserve basic consumer protections to help them access the care they need when they need it most.

We applaud the Democratic initiative in Congress in support of a Patient Bill of Rights and stand ready to work with Congress to enact national legislation to protect America's working families this year.